



ACCESSIBILITY TOOLKIT

for Land Managers

**RETHINKING DISABILITY &
ACCESSIBILITY FOR A MORE
INCLUSIVE OUTDOORS.**

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***SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR
PARTNERS AND SPONSORS:***

Adventures Without Limits

Oregon Spinal Cord Injury
Connection

REI

Lora & Martin Kelley Family
Foundation

Meyer Memorial Trust



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About Willamette Partnership

Willamette Partnership is a conservation nonprofit dedicated to solving complex environmental problems in ways that work for people. Known for helping state and federal natural resource agencies, businesses, and conservation interests take advantage of opportunities to achieve conservation, social, and economic outcomes.





"We all seek the same adventure, freedom and thrill of the outdoors."



ACCESSIBILITY MEANS MORE THAN ADA

What makes you feel welcome in outdoor spaces? When you visit a new park, how do you know that people want you to be there, that you belong?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed to make public spaces more accessible to people with disabilities at a time when people were barely getting out of their houses. Through the protection afforded by the ADA, people are more empowered than ever to get out and participate in all the same activities non-disabled people do.

As important as it is though, the ADA is really just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to making the outdoors inclusive for the full spectrum of people within the disabilities communities. People of all abilities mountain bike, road bike, climb, hike, kayak, hunt, fish, and explore like a majority of outdoor lovers. They too seek a variety of outdoor challenges, with opportunities to leisurely move through old growth forests or completely exhaust themselves after a strenuous hike or bike ride.

We all seek the same adventure, freedom, and thrill of the outdoors.

By thinking creatively and experientially, land managers can move past ADA compliance and into an equity-centered approach that provides a truly diverse range of access for all sorts of people. Inclusion is more than a short paved trail in a park—it's about creating options for diverse experiences that people of all abilities can enjoy.

This Toolkit is designed to help land managers understand how people with disabilities engage with the outdoors and what they want out of those experiences. It offers recommendations and best practices for how to transform public lands in ways that are truly inclusive.

By developing an inclusive equity lens that takes into account all shades and forms of disability, making commitments to center equity in planning and programming, and thinking about someone's holistic experience on your land, you can help open up your spaces to your entire community in ways that honor and celebrate diversity.

OUR VISION:

Is that every person has equitable access to incredible outdoor recreation opportunities, regardless of their ability level. By focusing on social barriers to access as much as physical barriers, we envision a future where land managers proactively create spaces that are truly inclusive and welcoming for their communities.

A person wearing a tan cap and a teal jacket is seen from behind, paddling a red canoe on a calm lake. The water is dark with some ripples. In the background, there is a dense forest of tall evergreen trees under a cloudy sky. The scene is peaceful and scenic.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Language can be intimidating for people new to working in the disability space, but using the right lingo can help build comfort around discussing disabilities and accessibility with your community.

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

When discussing disability, talk about what a person "has" rather than what a person "is." For example, instead of saying "disabled person," say "person with a disability." This person-first approach is a way to center someone's personhood, instead of focusing on their disability.

Language is also varied and preferred terms vary from person-to-person. If you're not sure about someone's preferred language around disability, don't be afraid to ask them about it! This is a great way to show respect and build trust with others.

DEVELOPING AN EQUITY LENS

Developing an equity lens is important for anyone who works with people. By learning more about the barriers that specific communities face, it can help root your perspective in empathy and compassion. It's an especially important tool for land managers to develop, as it can help you better understand how different kinds of people relate to the public spaces in your charge.

Adding an equity lens to your toolbelt that's inclusive of disability offers an opportunity to see public lands through someone else's experience. It can also help you more easily identify ways to make your spaces accessible. For example, how does someone in a wheelchair navigate parking lots, sidewalks, and bathrooms? Do guidebooks and trail maps have information about the slopes and surface types so people can easily identify which options are within their ability level? How does a scenic viewpoint look from a seated position?

It is also important to acknowledge that inequity exists all around our world and often intersects with disability. Ability, race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other dimensions of identity all experience unique barriers in outdoor spaces, and each person is a combination of all those different dimensions. Disability isn't a standalone or one-dimensional identity—it touches everybody. When thinking about how to construct your own equity lens, try thinking about these identities as they intersect and interact with one another.

For example, someone with a physical disability may need a custom wheelchair or handcycle to take out on a trail. These specialized pieces of equipment cost thousands of dollars, adding a financial barrier to outdoor recreation that might push something as simple as hiking out of reach for someone depending upon that person's socioeconomic status. By considering how disability and socioeconomic status intersect, you can think creatively about how to address these specific barriers that overlap between identities.

INTERSECTIONALITY:

"The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, ableism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect for marginalized individuals or groups." The term was initially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work on the intersection of race and feminism.



* **DISABILITY LOOKS LIKE...**



Injury/Disability: Spinal cord injury
Age: 42
Biggest barrier: "Too many to name, but huge gravel is one... The lip to ramps being too high off ground."
Favorite outdoor activity: Kayaking, hiking, and camping



Injury/Disability: Low spinal cord injury with some leg mobility
Age: 30
Biggest barrier: Lose gravel and narrow car barriers like boulders
Favorite outdoor activity: Mountain biking and downhill skiing





Injury/Disability: Blind
Age: 60
Biggest barrier: Unmarked drop offs
Favorite outdoor activity: Hiking, biking, and climbing

Injury/Disability: Stroke
Age: 73
Biggest barrier: Lack of access to remote locations
Favorite outdoor activity: Hiking and skiing



Injury/Disability: Cerebral Palsy
Age: 18
Biggest barrier: Access to information about accessible trails and parks
Favorite outdoor activity: Kayaking and biking



SOMETHING TO CONSIDER:

Consider what emotional and societal barriers might exist that keep people from seeking outdoor opportunities. A lot of people with disabilities carry anxiety and shame with them from a long history of exclusion and institutionalization that still shapes societal views of disability.



ADAPTIVE CAMPING

A group of partners and sponsors teamed up to address the barriers to camping and make Oregon State parks more accessible. [Oregon Health & Outdoors Initiative](#), [Oregon Spinal Cord Injury Connection](#), [Adventures Without Limits](#) and Oregon State Parks Department convened to develop an event that would showcase the outdoor enthusiasm that is alive-and-well in the disability community, and the barriers they face to enjoying state parks.

TOKENISM:

Tokenism is when a single person is expected to represent one aspect of their identity. Often seen as checking a box, in practice it reduces someone to just their race, gender, or disability. For example, if someone with a disability visits your space and is eagerly told how great it is to see them there, then asked a list of questions on how to make the experience better for people with disabilities, it transforms their day from one of recreation to one where their differences are highlighted. Most people don't go out to nature with the intention of educating people for free!

"NON-MOTORIZED":

Mountain biking trails and other paths that are labeled "no motorized vehicle use" read as being exclusive of adaptive bikes that have e-assist or powered wheelchairs. There have been several instances of able-bodied recreators calling out or harassing users with powered adaptive equipment, even if those specific devices are actually allowed on those trails.

COMMON BARRIERS TO ACCESS

As you develop your inclusive equity lens, thinking through social and physical barriers is one way to better understand diverse disability perspectives. While it's no substitute for authentic community engagement and listening to people with lived experience, here's a list of potential physical and social barriers to consider from different perspectives.

SOCIAL BARRIERS:

Social barriers are the explicit and implicit messages that make people feel excluded or unwelcome in public spaces. While a lot of accessibility resources focus on the importance of removing physical barriers, social barriers can sometimes have an even bigger impact on keeping people away from certain places.

When we talk about making spaces accessible, we're also talking about the social aspects of inclusion. While physical barriers and the built environment can be easily identified and changed, some social barriers are a lot deeper and harder to identify.

COMMON SOCIAL BARRIERS INCLUDE:

- **NOT BEING INVITED TO RECREATE**
- **SEEING ONLY ABLE-BODIED PEOPLE IN MARKETING MATERIALS**
- **UNCLEAR OR INCOMPLETE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS AND FEATURES**
- **"ACCESSIBLE FEATURES" BEING ISOLATED FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE PARK**
- **HISTORICAL EXCLUSION AND INACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC LANDS**
- **TOKENISM**
- **HARASSMENT FROM ABLE-BODIED RECREATORS**
- **COST**

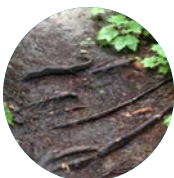
PHYSICAL BARRIERS:

Physical barriers include any object or infrastructure that can physically prevent someone from accessing a space. These could be anything, from the size of gravel used in a parking lot to motor vehicle barriers at a trailhead.

Developing an equity lens for projects can look like imagining yourself in someone else's physical space. What would a viewpoint look like from a seated position? Will one single step on this trail prevent people in manual wheelchairs from being able to access the whole space?

COMMON PHYSICAL BARRIERS INCLUDE:

- **TRAILS AROUND GATES**
- **LOOSE-PACKED GROUND COVER**
- **BALLARDS & BOULDERS**
- **INACCESSIBLE OR INCOMPLETE SIGNAGE**
- **ROOTS & ROCKS ON A TRAIL**
- **RAILINGS AT EYE-LEVEL**
- **STEPS & CURB CUTS**
- **DROP OFFS**
- **LACK OF TRANSPORTATION**
- **BUSY STREETS**
- **TRAIL AND SURFACE DEGRADATION**
- **BATHROOM PARTITIONS**



**NUKE - Off Road
Recumbent
handcycle**

● **\$8,250**

49"

**TYPICAL
SINGLE-TRACK
TRAIL WIDTH**

18"

*** TEST IT OUT:**

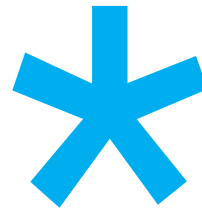
If you're wondering how a certain surface feels to navigate, or if you're wondering whether or not a railing is preventing someone from seeing a viewpoint in a seated position, bring a chair with you to test it out. This doesn't automatically mean that a space that's accessible for you is accessible for everyone else, but it can help you better understand other perspectives and make more informed decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Making outdoor spaces more accessible doesn't always require expensive ADA overhauls or huge budgets. In fact, there are plenty of things land managers can do to make their spaces more inclusive with nothing more than some time, sweat, and creative thinking!

We've designed these recommendations to offer a starting point for managers who are new to the accessibility space, but it is by no means an exhaustive list. Each recommendation works in tandem with the others to create more inclusive spaces, and we encourage you to think of this as a map instead of a checklist. Let's dive in!

COMMIT TO INCLUSION



Without a formal commitment, accessibility and inclusion are often passed over when resources are tight and to-do lists are long. Commit to focus on access and inclusion in all projects as the new normal, and formalize the commitment through internal policies, development regulations, and the budgeting process. Though doing this work may feel labor-intensive up front, learning these new strategies and making accessibility a priority will enrich outdoor experiences for all users.

1.

Require an accessibility analysis of every upgrade project and new development at the start of the project. From initial planning and design phases all the way through implementation and maintenance, go into projects with a proactive accessibility lens, and make it a priority throughout the process.

2.

Offer accessibility training opportunities for employees and include a disability lens as part of broader diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within your organization.

While many DEI trainings understandably center on race, being inclusive of disability as part of a well-rounded DEI lens is paramount. Make sure that trainings are available to help staff (planners, administrators, and public-facing roles) better understand a wide range of disability perspectives.

3.

Engage disability communities and consultants with lived experience to provide feedback before and during project design.

If you want to design inclusive spaces for disability communities, make sure you're engaging those communities at the outset of the project, instead of guessing what they want and offering time for feedback post-design. There are a number of disability rights and affinity groups around the country. Try finding some in your local community so they can give responsive feedback and be partners in the design process.





ASKING FOR HELP

It's important to engage communities in an authentic, equitable way that avoids tokenism and fairly compensates people for their time and expertise. Here are a few tips to make sure you're on the right track:

Avoid tokenism by engaging multiple people with diverse disabilities and experiences.

Actively seek out advocates, activists, consultants, and designers with lived experience who are committed to participating in the work. This not only respects the experience of people with disabilities, but also gives you the opportunity to get well-informed and knowledgeable feedback.



Make clear asks with clear boundaries.

While many people are often willing to share about their experiences, it's important to be upfront and honest about how much time and emotional energy we're asking people to spend giving feedback and perspective.

Pay people for their time and expertise.

More than just the cost of time, sharing about personal experiences, struggles, and perspectives come at an emotional price, especially for people who live in a society that constantly excludes them and focuses on their lack of ability. Pay people a fair wage for their input, and offer accommodations like food and transportation if the meetings will be in-person.

ADDRESSING SOCIAL BARRIERS

Honoring history and moving forward. Because so many places have historically been unwelcome or inaccessible to people with disabilities, the social barriers to access are often just as powerful deterrents as the physical barriers. But by directly addressing these barriers through authentic, equitable community engagement, you can help disability communities overcome the social barriers and feel truly welcome on public lands.

- 4. Invite people with disabilities into your space.** A welcoming invite can make all the difference for some people. It can be hard to feel welcome or supported in lots of public spaces when experiencing a physical disability, as much of society still treats disability as a burden. By extending an invite and offering reassurance, you can build a bridge to these people and make them feel included before they even arrive. Consider discounts to help with financial barriers.
- 5. Make photos and detailed information easy to access on a variety of platforms.** Lots of sites and features labeled as "ADA Accessible" simply aren't accessible for everyone, so offering people a chance to learn about a space in several ways can help reassure them that they're able to access the places they want to visit. One of the most-used tools by people in wheelchairs is Google Streetview, which shows on-the-ground images of places so they can see what a place looks like for themselves before visiting. If your site doesn't have Street View images, consider taking lots of photos and posting them online in an easy-to-find spot with detailed descriptions.
- 6. Identify and communicate accessible transportation options.** Thinking experientially means thinking about how people get to your space. Check into your local public transportation options and see if they're accessible. Once you've identified what options are available, advertise them to the community.
- 7. Include accessibility in regular features instead of creating exclusively accessible options.** People with disabilities want to hike the same trails, see the same sights, and ski the same slopes as non-disabled people. Avoid creating spaces or experiences that are just for people with disabilities; instead, focus on making existing recreation opportunities inclusive.
- 8. Use signage to educate the non-disabled.** Some hiking and biking trails specifically prohibit motor vehicles or restrict use on the types of mobility devices that can be used. There have been instances of non-disabled people telling wheelchair users and hand-cyclists that their devices are prohibited on those trails. To avoid this, include information about handcycles, wheelchairs, and other adaptive equipment that's permitted on trails to let non-disabled recreators know that trails are usable with a mobility device.



COMMUNICATION QUICK TIPS

List accessible and ADA features on your website in a centralized, easy-to-access location. Having this information in one place can quickly empower someone to make a decision about whether or not to visit your site.

Photograph and describe your site's various features in detail. From parking lots and bathrooms to trail surfaces and viewpoint access, people with physical disabilities want to have a clear picture of what to expect before they go to a site. The more information and images you're able to provide, the more informed a decision someone will be able to make about their visit.

Make better trail signs. Instead of writing "ADA Accessible" on trail signs or brochures, include specific information about the trail's full features. Include a thorough description of different sections of the trail (like slopes, changes in terrain, or sudden drop-offs along the side), trail length, and set clear expectations of what people may encounter along the way (i.e. horses, bikes, pedestrians). Knowing these details lets people make their own informed decision and is much more reassuring than a simple "ADA" label.

Include people with disabilities in your marketing materials. If people can see someone like them using the space, they're more likely to feel like the space is welcoming for them. Be careful to avoid tokenism, but make sure a variety of disabilities are represented in brochures, website photos, and other communications to show that you welcome disabilities communities.

Connect with disabilities communities through community and affinity groups. Sharing events with community groups can help you reach an audience you might not be connected to, especially when that group is a trusted source and advocate for community needs. By building relationships with these organizations, you've got an opportunity to reach more people and learn from groups who have experience with disability.



ADDRESSING PHYSICAL BARRIERS

Different levels of ability get erased when we focus solely on the ADA as our inclusion guidelines. ADA compliance is helpful, but it does not make places accessible or inclusive for all people with disabilities. It can sometimes hinder the creative thinking that can create access for a wider variety of people while requiring fewer resources.

9.

Think experientially instead of focusing on individual features. For example, some parks agencies have an accessible campground at one park, an accessible boat launch at another, and an accessible nature trail at yet another. Does that mean if someone is camping at your park, they can't do anything else? Or if they want to kayak for an afternoon, there's not a space for them to stay overnight?

10.

Address common physical barriers. Lots of the physical barriers mentioned above are fairly easy to address with low-cost solutions. Using your equity lens, you can start to think critically about how to address barriers during regular maintenance and enhancement projects without having to go through the full process of an ADA upgrade. Here are some common barriers and ways to address them:



Photo courtesy of Oregon Adaptive Sports

SMITH ROCK - SPRING THING

Every year since 1993, 200+ volunteers head out to Smith Rock State Park to maintain trails and prepare the space for the busy climbing season. In 2018, Oregon Adaptive Sports was invited to participate and worked with the rangers to remove barriers on a specific trail that is great for adaptive climbing. By inviting the disability community out as a partner, park officials were able to work together with the community to think creatively about the space and had the body power to complete a project that makes the space much more accessible.

- **Gates:** While helpful for keeping out motor vehicles, they can be too wide for some people to easily move through. Try giving more space on the side for wheelchair access and leveling the ground, removing rocks and roots for ease of use. Consider how easy it is to maneuver levers, locks, and other mechanical features.
- **Ground cover:** Trails are very commonly covered with gravel that is too large and hard to roll over, and most people don't realize that a hard packed, natural surface like dirt is often more desirable, as long as debris and roots are removed from trails.
- **Ballards and boulders:** These are often placed too close for a wheelchair or handcycle to pass. Giving a standard clearance of at least 30' inches would make a huge difference in allowing most people to move past.
- **Roots and limbs:** A single fallen tree or exposed root can be impassable for some people. Stay on top of trail maintenance to ensure that trails are free of obstacles. This can even be a great way to engage the community to help build relationships and connection.
- **Railing:** When a safety wall is necessary, try using a wire fencing that opens up the view and allows wheelchair users to get closer, rather than dense planks, stone or other visibility-impairing structures.
- **Steps/Curb cuts:** Where possible, replace steps (especially if there are only 1-2) with rolling slopes. Some wheelchair users can manage these slopes where they cannot manage the steps, and it makes it easier on other users with wheeled devices like strollers, too. The more curb cuts the better, without them wheelchair users are limited on access points.
- **Sidewalks and designated crossings:** In urban areas, having sidewalks from public transportation hubs can be the difference between someone making it into the park safely or not. Even if a wheelchair user lives a block away from a park, they may be hesitant to visit if there is a busy street without many safety precautions. Work with local planning and transportation partners to make access into the park as inclusive as the park itself.
- **Paved trail degradation and erosion:** One of the biggest problems with paved trails is the shifting and cracking of surfaces that happens over time. More than just an annoyance, breaks in the trail due to erosion can make "accessible" trails completely inaccessible within just a couple of seasons. Pavement should only be applied if the maintenance is manageable; otherwise, find another solution for hard packed surfaces that's less likely to erode over time.
- **Bathrooms:** True ADA bathrooms are costly to create, but campsite bathrooms usually have stalls that are just barely too tight for a manual wheelchair user to access. Removing a partition between two stalls can be a quick, cost-free fix that can make your existing bathrooms accessible without needing a full-on ADA upgrade.

RILEY RANCH RESERVE



Appearing relatively untouched in some places, the land features open meadows, juniper and pine forests, unique lava flows, cliffs and the river's rocky canyon. The park is host to many native plant species, migratory birds and wildlife.

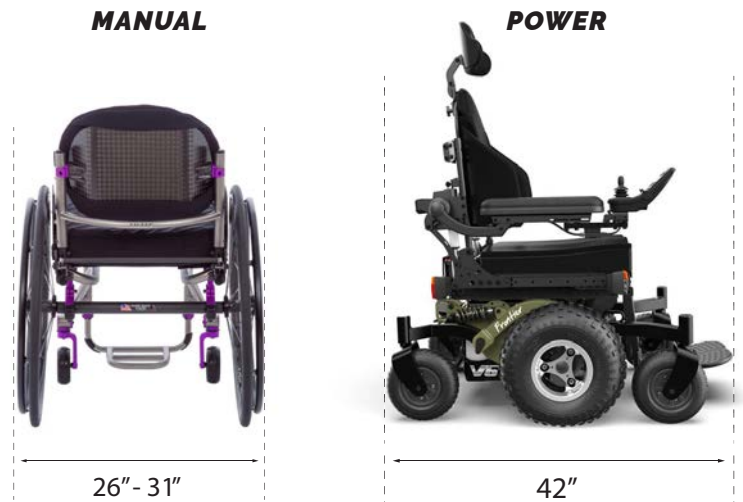
There are 1.57 miles of soft-surface accessible trail above the canyon leading to a steel and wire railed viewpoint that allows for a full unobstructed view of the canyon.

QUICK TIPS- FOR BETTER ACCESS

COMMON DIMENSIONS

Because repetition is important; here are some quick references and resources to keep on hand.

Wheelchairs come in many variations, these are some common dimensions and configurations to take note of:



COMMON OBSTACLES

Some of the most common obstacles that don't seem like much but can make or break someone's visit:

Distance between objects like gates, boulders, and ballards should be a minimum of 30" for wheelchair access.



PHYSICAL BARRIERS:

GROUND SURFACING:



EXAMPLES OF HAZARDOUS TRAIL CONDITIONS:



ROCKS



LIMBS



DROP OFFS



ROOTS

EXAMPLES OF BETTER SURFACE MATERIAL:



DECOMPOSED GRANITE



HARD PACKED GRAVEL/DIRT

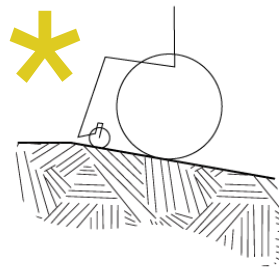
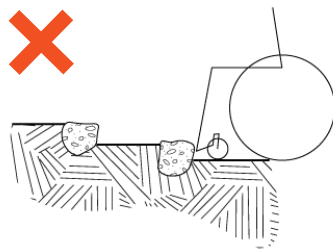


HARD PACKED DIRT

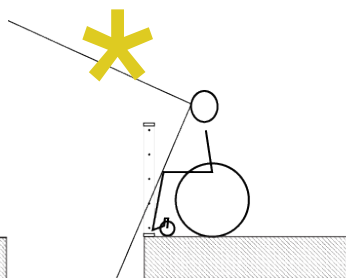
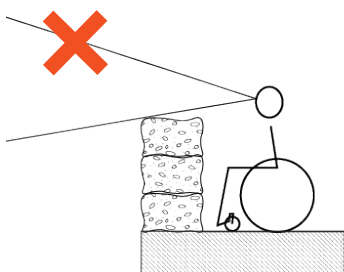


LIGHT GRAVEL ON HARD DIRT

SMALL SLOPE INSTEAD OF SHALLOW STEPS:



TRANSPARENT FENCING: *STONE VS. WIRE*



TRY:



RESOURCE LINKS

Documents, places, people, and organizations to explore for help on your next projects.

DOCUMENTS:

Accessibility in the National Park Service

https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/upload/All_In_Accessibility_in_the_NPS_2015-2020_FINAL.pdf

Access Recreation - Trail Guidelines

https://accessrecreation.org/Trail_Guidelines/Title_page.html

Accessible Digital Content

<https://disabledhikers.com/2020/07/06/accessible-outdoor-content/>

Creating Active Outdoor Opportunities for All

<https://www.nchpad.org/1607/6634/Creating~Active~Outdoor~Opportunities~for~All>

PRECEDENTS:

Smith Rock State Park - Spring Thing

<https://smithrock.com/annual-smith-rock-spring-thing>

Adaptive Camping with Oregon Spinal Cord Injury Connection

<https://oregonsci.org/adaptive-camping/>

Trail Assesment in Portland by Access Trails

<https://www.accesstrails.org/overview/home/index.html>

Article on National Parks accessibility efforts

<https://roadtrippers.com/magazine/national-parks-accessibility/>





COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS:

Adventures Without Limits - Portland

AWLoutdoors.org

Disabled Hikers

Disabledhikers.com

Move United - Adaptive Sports Resources - National

MoveUnitedSport.org/sports/adaptive-sports/

Oregon Adaptive Sports - Bend

OregonAdaptiveSports.org

Oregon Health & Outdoors Initiative

HealthAndOutdoors.org

Oregon Spinal Cord Injury Connection - Portland

OregonSCI.org

Willamette Partnership

WillamettePartnership.org

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